

Reflections on linguistic fieldwork in Mexico and Central America

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In this chapter, I endeavor to contribute towards a collective effort to reflect on the evolution and state-of-the-art of language documentation. I reflect on Himmelman (1998) from the perspective of language endangerment and revitalization in Mexico and Central America today. I identify a number of topics that are critical to the practice of language documentation in the region and that in my view were only marginally mentioned in Himmelmann's seminal paper. These topics revolve around the participation, consent, interests and needs of speakers of the very languages that are documented. Notably, I argue that (i) language documentation is critical for language revitalization, (ii) I echo current calls in the community-based research literature for ensuring that language documentation is collaborative, (iii) that to this end, training opportunities for language community members need to increase and (iv) that a concerted effort is needed to develop appropriate ways to ensure informed consent in language documentation.

1. Introduction¹ In this chapter, I endeavor to contribute towards the collective effort in this volume to reflect on the evolution and state-of-the-art of language documentation. I hope to bring to the forefront topics that are especially relevant to Mexico and Central America today. Pérez Báez, Rogers and Labrada (2016) analyze the many factors that impact language documentation as practiced in Latin America and argue for the need to develop practices and principles that are in line with the particulars of Latin American contexts. It is with the hope of contributing towards fulfilling this need that I write this chapter.

¹I am grateful for comments and suggestions from Hilaria Cruz Cruz, Alí García Segura, Carolyn O'Meara, Carlos Sánchez Avendaño, Mandana Seyfeddinipur, and Susan Smythe-Kung. Any errors or omissions are of course my sole responsibility.

2. Usability and language documentation in the context of language endangerment An argument that Himmelmann (1998) makes in support of language documentation as an independent, stand-alone endeavor is that “Collections of primary data have at least the potential of being of use to a larger group of interested parties” (p. 163). This argument raises questions about the extent to which primary data collected without a particular hypothesis as a goal can inform an analytical pursuit. I do not wish to expound on this particular point, however. Rather, I focus on the potential that language documentation does have for one particular group—that of the speakers of the documented language. Himmelmann does state that among potential beneficiaries of language documentation is “...the speech community itself, which might be interested in a record of its linguistic practices and traditions” (p. 163). In hindsight, and in the context of the severity of the global language endangerment crisis and the actions of the linguistics community in response to it, the marginal mention in Himmelmann’s article of the speech community as a beneficiary of language documentation demands attention.

Data from the Endangered Languages Catalog (ELCat) include 164 languages in Mexico and Central America in some stage of language endangerment (Table 1). The Global Survey of Revitalization Efforts (henceforth the Survey) (Pérez Báez, Vogel and Okura 2018, Pérez Báez, Vogel & Patolo, in press) documented 245 efforts around the world: 32 were in Mexico and five in Central America. Table 2 shows that 18 efforts were for languages that have now lost their child speakers (categories 1, and 4 to 8) while 14 have less and less children (categories 5 and 6). Only 8 languages still have child speakers (categories 6 and 7).

Endangerment status	Speaker number trends	Number
Dormant	There are certain languages about which one source says the language in question is “extinct,” “probably extinct,” “possibly extinct,” or has “no known speakers,” where another equally credible source reports it as still having speakers. In this Catalogue (ELCat), languages of this sort as well as languages whose last fluent speaker is reported to have died in recent times, even when sources do not disagree are listed as “dormant.”	6
Awakening	Languages which have lost their last native speakers but which have on-going revitalization efforts	2
Critically Endangered	A small percentage of the community speaks the language, and speaker numbers are decreasing very rapidly.	9
Severely Endangered	Less than half of the community speaks the language, and speaker numbers are decreasing at an accelerated pace.	6
Endangered	Only about half of community members speak the language. Speaker numbers are decreasing steadily, but not at an accelerated pace.	17
Threatened	A majority of community members speak the language. Speaker numbers are gradually decreasing.	58
Vulnerable	Most members of the community or ethnic group speak the language. Speaker numbers may be decreasing, but very slowly.	49
At risk ²		13
No LEI		4
TOTAL		164

Table 1: Language endangerment in Mexico and Central America. (Source: <http://www.endangeredlanguages.com> last accessed on April 14, 2018.)

²An *at risk* language is one with an LEI of 0 but for which the confidence is lower than 100%, meaning that not all factors that determine the LEI are known (Holton, p.c., April 14, 2018).

Status	Number
1 There are no first-language speakers.	2
2 There are a few elderly speakers.	2
3 Many of the grandparent generation speak the language, but the younger people generally do not.	8
4 Some adults in the community are speakers, but the language is not spoken by children.	6
5 Most adults in the community are speakers, but children generally are not.	10
6 Most adults and some children are speakers.	4
7 All members of the community, including children, speak the language, but we want to make sure this doesn't change	4
8 There is a new population of speakers or people are beginning to learn the language after a period of time in which no one spoke the language.	0
Regional subtotal for Mexico and Central America	36

Table 2: Intergenerational transmission index for Central America and Mexico in the Global Survey of Revitalization Efforts

In reference to language endangerment, Himmelmann states: “My concern is the application of this framework for recording little-known or previously unrecorded languages. Most of these languages are endangered...” (p. 176). This focuses on addressing the likelihood that many languages of the world would cease to be available for future study. The data I have presented above makes the severity of the endangerment situation quantifiable and supports Himmelmann’s call. I wish to add, however, that language documentation is of high importance to those engaged in revitalizing their languages.

In the Survey, respondents had the opportunity to articulate, in open text fields, up to five revitalization objectives. Nine categories were identified and responses were coded into them (see Pérez Báez, Okura and Vogel 2018 and Pérez Báez, Vogel & Patolo in press for coding methods). The top objectives category documented at a global level was language teaching with 23.7% of responses. Language documentation and analysis came in fourth place with 13.4% of responses. Regionally, in México and Central America language teaching was also the top category with 20% of responses but language documentation and analysis came in second place with 18% of the objectives articulated. One respondent states as an objective *Rescatar y documentar la lengua a través de entrevistas con hablantes [e] investigaciones históricas y lingüísticas* (‘To revive and document the language by way of interviews with speakers and historical and linguistic research’). Another focuses on *Conformación de materiales didácticos para la enseñanza del hñáñho* (‘creation of pedagogical materials to teach Hñáñho’). Whether documentation is explicitly stated as an objective or we infer that documentation is needed for creating language teaching materials, these numbers provide us with empirical data to unequivocally argue that language documentation is critical for language revitalization.

3. Participation of and consultation with native speakers Related to the relevance of language documentation for revitalization has been the role of members of the language community in the documentation process itself. A considerable shift in the last 20 years is the increasing advocacy for community-based research in linguistics. Himmelmann considers “close cooperation with members of the speech community” (p. 171) as necessary for high-quality documentation and that “Ideally, the person in charge of the compilation speaks the language fluently and knows the cultural and linguistic practices in the speech community very well” (p. 171). It is then from within the language community that the better suited compilers of language documentation may be found. Bribri speaker, researcher and cultural expert Alí García Segura has published on ecological knowledge and takes the time to provide non-Bribri readers with explanations that might bring them closer to Bribri thinking (see García Segura 2016). Cruz (2017) provides an outstandingly detailed and insightful analysis of *La42 qin4 kchin4* (‘Prayers for the Community’), “part of a ritual carried out regularly by elders and traditional San Juan Quiahije authorities in their official capacity as community representatives” (509). As a member of the community and native speaker of the Quiahije Chatino language, Cruz is not only strongly positioned to interact with the elders and authorities for the purpose of obtaining permission to document the prayers but has the cultural acumen to carry out a valid and valuable verbal art analysis (see Chapter 37, this volume). When the life of Emiliano Cruz Santiago was cut short, not only was it a painful loss to those who love him, but also his native Southern Sierra Zapotec language lost a dedicated and meticulous documenter of the cultural knowledge embedded in it (see Cruz Santiago 2010). The level of cultural acuity that documenters such as García Segura, Cruz and Cruz Santiago possess is likely well beyond the reach of any researcher external to the language communities.

However, community collaboration or the active participation in language documentation by native speakers cannot solely be motivated by a drive for quality assurance.

Ethical considerations in linguistic research and advocacy for community-based research (CBR) in 1998 were already articulating the critical nature of participation of, and consultation and collaboration with members of a language community. Himmelmann cites seminal works on these topics and asks “how the communities can be actively involved in the design of a concrete documentation project” (p. 188). It is noteworthy that literature on CBR has been influenced by research in Central America that predates Himmelmann (1998). Nora England, based on experiences with speakers of Mayan languages in Guatemala, delivered a poignant statement about the obligations of linguists with regards to language community members in Hale et. al (1992). Other examples come from experiences working with the Rama (Grinevald and Pivot 2014 *inter alia*) and the Sumu-Mayangna communities (Benedicto et. al 2007 *inter alia*) both in Nicaragua. Fast forward to the year 2018 and the literature on CBR has become copious with works such as the recent volume *Perspectives on Language and Linguistics: Community-Based Research* (Bischoff and Jany 2018), with three chapters based on Mexico and Central America.

Alongside collaboration has come advocacy for the training in documentation for native speakers of languages that are endangered and/or not well documented, both within and outside degree-granting programs. At the doctoral level, Mexico’s Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (CIESAS) focuses on “*La formación de especialistas hablantes de una lengua indígena que puede ser su primera o segunda lengua, siempre y cuando acrediten conocimiento de la lengua indoeuropea que vayan a trabajar*” (“specialized training for speakers of an indigenous language, be it their first or second language, provided they are able to show knowledge of the Indo-European language they intend to work with”).³ Outside of Mexico, programs such as that of the University of Texas at Austin have trained generations of speakers of indigenous languages from the Americas who now comprise a cadre of excellent documenters, researchers and faculty members practicing in top universities. Academic institutions are increasingly active partners of language communities for documentation. One example is the Escuela de Filología, Lingüística y Literatura at the Universidad de Costa Rica, which combines higher-education training and research into a social action model based on close collaboration with the language communities of the country. This approach has led to teacher training programs and a copious production of teaching materials and dictionaries.

Outside degree-granting institutions, a recent example is the language documentation workshop offered in Mexico in December 2017 by the Endangered Languages Documentation Program (ELDP) in collaboration with CIESAS and the Biblioteca de Investigación Juan de Córdova. The training was offered primarily to native speakers of Mesoamerican languages. There is high-demand for training of this type. For instance, community members may not wish or be able to leave their communities for a number of years in order to acquire language documentation skills through a degree-granting program. This is especially the case for those who have government responsibilities in their communities. Similarly, teachers with a degree in hand and an ongoing career might only be able to meet their needs for training by attending workshops offered outside working hours or outside the academic year. Pérez Báez (2016) describes language revitalization activities

³From the call for admissions applications to the 2018-2022 program at <https://docencia.ciesas.edu.mx/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/COMP-Cartel-Linguistica-1-1.pdf>, last accessed on April 19, 2018. The translation is my own.

by school teachers in the Zapotec community of San Lucas Quiavini. A couple of months prior to the writing of this paper, some of the teachers reached out to inquire about opportunities to obtain equipment, funding and training for language documentation as part of the school's activities. The opportunities within country, it turns out, are very limited. Outside of Mexico, opportunities such as those offered by the Endangered Language Fund and the Foundation for Endangered Languages for funding, and the longstanding Institute on Collaborative Language Research (CoLang) for training, are of the scope to serve some of these needs. However, the dependency on English as the working language of these programs stands as a solid barrier for many in Mexico and Central America.

4. Ethics, consent and access Himmelmann raises the issue of community rights over the documentation and dissemination of language data. This topic has developed a stronghold in the practice of language documentation, as it should have. However, guidelines for ethics in language documentation in Mexico, for instance, are not well established, and neither is the process of institutional review of a project or informed consent. With national and international researchers carrying out documentation in Mexico, there are inconsistencies in the process by which informed consent is obtained. Further, with institutional review boards outside of Mexico dictating ethical protocols for research in Mexico, questions arise about the influence and appropriateness of such principles.

A related issue is that of ensuring that language community members will have access to the products of language documentation projects. O'Meara and González Guadarrama (2016) expound on the complications they found in creating community access to language documentation in Seri and Nahuatl communities in Mexico. In recent years, the Red de Archivos de Lenguas México (RALMEX) emerged as a network of institutions involved in language documentation. CIESAS, in collaboration with the Dokumentation Bedrohter Sprachen (DoBeS) program at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics and LinguaPax, created the Acervo Digital de Lenguas Indígenas Víctor Franco Pellotier, which provides access to materials in a dozen language groups. I venture to say, however, that the bulk of the documentation produced in keeping with contemporary best practices in language documentation is archived in two primary repositories: The Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America (AILLA) at the University of Texas at Austin and the Endangered Languages Archive (ELAR) at SOAS University of London. These archives have an international scope and are faced with the challenge of making their documentation accessible in *lingua francas* other than English. AILLA offers an interface in Spanish in addition to English. ELAR's interface is in English but the idea of developing portals for communities in the language of a particular documentation deposit in addition to the major *lingua franca* has been under consideration.

5. Conclusions In this contribution I have reflected on the role and relevance of language documentation in the linguistic landscapes of Mexico and Central America from the vantage point of 20 years after the publication of Himmelmann (1998). I have identified a number of topics that are critical to the practice of language documentation in the region and that in my view were only marginally mentioned in Himmelmann's seminal paper. These topics revolve around the participation, consent, interests and needs of speakers of the very languages that are documented. I hope to have argued convincingly that


these topics demand that the linguistics community, and anyone involved in language documentation, keep them in the forefront.

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